

History of Lehi's First Undertaking Establishment

Henry Lewis, Owner and Operator

By his daughter-Verda Lewis Peterson

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In, 1895, my father Henry Lewis, worked in the People's Co-operative Institution as a carpenter. Here he made caskets for those who died. These caskets were wide at the top and narrowed down at the foot to a point just wide enough to accommodate the feet of the corpse.

If the deceased were a woman or a child the Relief Society Sisters would go to the home to wash and lay out the body. Some of the brethren assisted in this work when the body was that of a man. Often coins were placed on the eyes to keep them closed and frequently rocks were used as weights to keep the body straight. Family members and friends would sit up with the dead each night until the burial.

I have heard my father tell the story of a Lehi man who was badly crippled. After his death a large rock was placed on his chest in an effort to straighten the body. Four men who were sitting up with the corpse got to scuffling and without noticing it, somehow jarred the rock from its place. With the weight released the body sprang up into a sitting position. When the sitters saw the dead man sitting up they left in a big hurry.

About 1910, my father built a small frame work shop just north of our home, at 807 North, 2nd West, where he continued to make caskets and trim them. At that time most of the caskets were made of stained wood.

There were no cars for use at funerals at that time. A black hearse could be hired or borrowed from the livery stable. The livery stable had for use at such times two hacks in which the mourners could ride in. These hacks were long buggy-type vehicles with tops, they had seats on each side running the length of the hack, the back and was open. Some years later, the livery stable purchased a white hearse, using two white horses to pull it. This hearse was always used

for the women and larger children. Caskets of small children were placed on the laps of the mourners riding in one of the hacks to the cemetery, and no hearse would be used.

Often a body was brought to the shop and left. I remember one occasion when a man had been shot to death late at night. His body was brought in and left until father could take care of it. A neighbor who had heard about the shooting, noticed that father was at the shop very early and came in to ask about it. The body was on the floor where it had been left, and as the lady came through the door she almost stepped on the corpse. Her screams could have been heard a block away, as she went flying out the door. This story soon got around town and many people would walk blocks out of their way rather than pass the shop.

Somewhat later the Saint Louis Company was sending out literature advertising their new ready made caskets. These new ones were similar in shape to the caskets of today. A plush trimming in white or pastel colors were used on the outside; the inside of the casket must still be trimmed. A padding of excelsior was covered with white factory and then a trimming of lace about ten inches wide was tacked around the edge. I helped trim many of the caskets, especially the little ones. I like to fix the little ones extra special.

One day I used all the fancy headed tacks father had, on one small coffin. These tacks were rather hard to get, they had to be ordered from Salt Lake City, and usually took a long time to reach us. Father used them sparingly, for trim only, making carpet tacks do wherever they could be covered. I put those fancy tacks real close together. I thought I had really decorated that little casket. When father saw what I thought I had done I was really in for it. But being a little fast on foot then he was and able to jump fences easier and better, I kept out of his way until he cooled down.

I helped some on small embalming jobs when bodies were brought to the shop to be cared for. In fact I thought I was a good as father. But it didn't take long to change my mind on that. When five people were drowned in a tragedy on Utah Lake, three of the bodies were brought to the shop to be cared for and I did a good job of helping with this work. The two remaining bodies were in the water about a week before they were found. After trying to help

with that smelly job, I was through being an undertaker.

I still had no fear of the dead and like most kids I liked to scare people. Some Sunday night when people were going home from Church, some of my friends and I would get in the shop, put someone in a casket. When someone stopped to peak in the window, the person in the coffin on a signal from one of us, would slowly sit up. One woman almost dumped her baby and buggy in the old ditch; others would scream and run. There got to be too many stories going around, so father put a stop to our fun.

In 1923, a law was passed making it necessary to embalm all bodies and no longer permissible to do this work in private homes. Before this time embalming had been done in most cases only when the body was to be shipped to some other community. Father's shop was rather small for handling the amount of work that would now be necessary, so he sold his business to Leo Goates.